

CERRO GRANDE BOARD OF INQUIRY  
FACT SHEET  
June 12, 2001

- On June 6, 2000, National Park Service (NPS) Director Robert Stanton commissioned a Board of Inquiry to review the facts and circumstances surrounding the Cerro Grande prescribed fire and its escape as a wildland fire.
- One of the major objectives of the Board of Inquiry (BOI) report was to make written findings for the purpose of recommending corrective action regarding those individuals in the NPS directly involved in the prescribed burn.
- The BOI review was carried out over a span of five months (June – October 2000) and included interviews with 26 witnesses and participants, many of whom had not been interviewed during the initial investigation. The report written by the BOI was finalized and transmitted to the NPS Director on February 26, 2001.
- The BOI report made recommendations with respect to five individuals: Roy Weaver, Superintendent at Bandelier (retired); Charisse Sydoriak, Chief of Resource Management; Al King, Fire Management Officer; Mike Powell, Fire Use Module Leader; and Paul Gleason, Regional Wildland Fire Specialist (retired).
- The BOI found that the removal of “the principal employees involved with the fire from federal service is not warranted.” It also found that there were “errors in judgement” but that “the planning and implementation actions of the principals were not arbitrary, capricious, or unreasonable in light of the information they had prior to the burn.”
- Consistent with testimony from the General Accounting Office – the investigative arm of Congress – and a study by the National Academy of Public Administration, the BOI found that the causes leading to the Cerro Grande fire had primarily to do with National Park Service policies “in place at the time of the fire.” [GAO testimony stated that “The Cerro Grande fire exposed policy implementation issues that need to be addressed for managing prescribed fires. Most of the issues involved procedural gaps or a lack of clarity about how policies are to be implemented.”
- The BOI also wrote that “The Cerro Grande Prescribed Fire demonstrates the need for all land managing agencies to come to common agreement on future guidelines and protocols for dealing with complex prescribe burns and to advocate for the highest levels of interagency understanding, standardization, and cooperation.”
- The BOI report recommends no action with respect to Superintendent Weaver and Paul Gleason. It recommended that additional training be provided for Charisse Sydoriak, Al King and Mike Powell.

- Of the five people mentioned, Powell, Sydoriak, and King were reassigned and no longer work at Bandelier. Paul Gleason is now retired and the Superintendent, Roy Weaver, retired prematurely.
- The person responsible for reviewing the BOI report and making determinations about personnel actions based on the report is the Regional Director of the Intermountain Region, Karen Wade.
- In a memo to the NPS Acting Director detailing her decision, Wade wrote that “the BOI and other investigations found that direction provided by the agency was inadequate, and the agency’s policies themselves had weaknesses. Therefore, the employees implementing those policies with that guidance cannot fairly be held responsible for the result.”
- Policy failings include the failure to fully implement the 1995 Federal Wildland Fire Policy. Much of this new policy was still being transmitted to the field, and many practical steps such as rewriting federal agency fire manuals, designing new training courses, revising the system for dispatching firefighting resources, and revising national and regional preparedness plans had not yet been completed. Had this policy been fully implemented at the time of Cerro Grande Fire, contingency resources would have been available immediately when the fire escaped its prescription; there would have been greater cooperation between the NPS and other federal, state, local and tribal agencies and governments; and the Cerro Grande prescribed fire would have been considered within a larger area and landscape.
- Aggressive steps have been taken by the NPS to address failures in policy and procedure pointed out by the GAO testimony, the NAPA study, the initial investigative team report and the Board of Inquiry report. The NPS:
  - Has participated with other federal land management agencies in conducting a complete review of the 2001 Federal Fire Policy.
  - Now requires a technical review of all NPS prescribed burn plans by equally qualified peers who are not directly involved in the plan, adding a new element to ensure the safety of the burn plans and ultimately increasing collaboration and coordination between federal agencies, tribes, and state and local governments.
  - Has new procedures in place to improve risk assessment and complexity analyses which are specifically designed to address concerns raised in both the initial Cerro Grande Investigation and the National Academy of Public Administration Phase I report on the Cerro Grande Fire.
  - Has developed an agency administrator’s checklist for a prescribed burn Go/No Go decision designed to increase the involvement of park superintendents in the implementation of prescribed burns and to increase the accountability of agency administrators in the prescribed burn process.
  - Has new procedures in place to clearly define how to staff prescribed fires adequately.

- Now requires all NPS “burn bosses” – those directly in charge of the prescribed burn -- to attend a prescribed fire policy, procedures and guidelines workshop.
  - The Intermountain Region brought together superintendents and fire management staff to ensure understanding of the content and implications of the new National Fire Plan and the 2001 Fire Appropriations Bill (P.L. 106-291). Other regions are holding similar sessions before the fire season.
- Since the Cerro Grande prescribed burn, Bandelier National Monument has had substantial staff changes. It now has a new Superintendent, Dennis Vasquez; a new Chief of Interpretation and Public Affairs, Lynne Dominy; a new Chief of Resource Management, John Mack; a new Fire Management Officer, Dean Clark; and a new Chief of Facility Management, Vito Spinale.